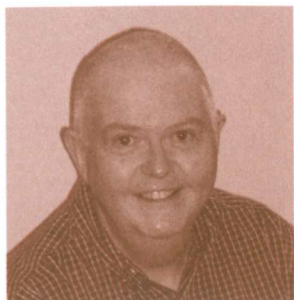


THE DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT – AN OPPORTUNITY FOR MISSION!

PAUL DICKEN



Paul Dicken became a committed Christian in 1965 and he and his wife Christine (who is a radiographer at Epsom Hospital) have two adult sons. They now live and work in Epsom, Surrey and are part of Generation, a community church serving the Epsom and Ewell area. Paul and Christine have provided respite care for disabled children on behalf of Social Services for many years. Paul is a qualified counsellor and a British Sign Language communicator with deaf people.

AS THE MEDIA CARRIES AN INCREASING AMOUNT OF PUBLICITY ABOUT THE DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT (DDA), IT IS EASY FOR CHURCHES WHO ARE STRETCHED FINANCIALLY TO SEE THE LEGAL OBLIGATIONS IMPOSED BY THE DDA AS JUST ANOTHER BURDEN. However, those perceptions can be transformed when church leaders are imaginative and see that when the Act's requirements are implemented, a whole new area of opportunity is created to reach out to what is, arguably, the largest disadvantaged and marginalised people group in the world. Consider the following statistics:

- About 15% of the UK population are disabled (approximately 8.6 million).
- Disabled people are five times as likely as non-disabled people to be out of work.
- Over 5.5 million disabled people are of working age (16% of the working population).
- Disabled people are twice as likely as non-disabled people to have no qualifications.

Working towards full compliance with the DDA equips churches to reach out to this huge people-group with the good news of the Christian gospel.

If we truly believe that the Christian gospel is for everyone, then we will want to be inclusive of disabled people, affirming them, sharing Christ's love with them and, importantly, being enriched by their presence. It is important to see each person as an individual, with talents and skills, rather than focusing on the challenges their disabilities may present. Churches must remember that inaccessible buildings and church activities are a barrier, not just to a disabled person, but also to their family. No one would want to attend a church and leave a disabled family member at home.

Churches are included within the scope of the Act in the UK, unlike in the USA where their much acclaimed Americans with Disabilities Act specifically excludes churches. Churches are treated as "service providers", which refers to their provision of facilities for worship, weddings, funerals, etc., in the same way that a plumber or gardener provides services.

The DDA introduced a duty on service providers: (1) since December 1996, it has been unlawful for service providers to treat disabled people less favourably for a reason related to their disability; (2) from October 1999, service providers have been required to make "reasonable adjustments" for disabled people, such as providing extra help or making changes to the way they provide their services; and (3), by October 2004, service providers will also have to have made "reasonable adjustments" to the

physical features of their premises to overcome physical barriers to access.

Churches can make sure they do not discriminate by considering their approach towards disabled people. A church is more likely to comply with the Act if all of its members are well informed and understand that it is unlawful to discriminate against disabled people. Leaders should then establish a positive policy of ensuring that all activities are available to everyone, including disabled people and making sure that all church members know about the policy. It is important for churches to review regularly their policy and activities to make sure they are accessible to disabled people. All elders/leaders/church staff should receive disability awareness training, especially those at the entrance who welcome people to the church. Do confer with disabled people and disability organisations in your area whether or not they are connected with your church – again, a way of mission as a by-product. In all cases, make sure that the dignity of a disabled person is respected when churches make any sort of service provision. Disabled people are entitled to be asked about how they might be best served and given opportunity to make the same choices as all of us.

People often ask what changes they need to make to comply with the DDA but unfortunately there isn't a list that you can tick to confirm compliance. All churches have a duty to make reasonable changes and provision for disabled people to enable them to access the church's activities. However, the extent to which it is reasonable for a church to undertake actions requiring expenditure depends on its size, resources and its particular circumstances. Unfortunately, the Act is imprecise as to what is "reasonable", but generally a cathedral or large well-attended church would be required to do more than a small rural church with a handful of worshippers.

Churches have an obligation to plan ahead – it is not sufficient to wait until a disabled person comes to church. Remember that good accessibility benefits everyone and there are many different types of disability – fewer than 8 per cent of disabled people are wheelchair users.

To make sure you, as a church, comply with the DDA, you should, first, undertake an accessibility audit to identify physical and attitude barriers to access for disabled people – ask disabled members and local disability organisations for assistance. Secondly, you should install appropriate equipment and make changes to accommodate different types of disability. Remember that aids and equipment have to be usable – for instance, if an accessible toilet is used for storage so that a disabled

Luke 14.23 urges us "... go out into the highways and byways and make them come in, so that my house may be full". Here Jesus was pointing out that his church is not complete without people on the margins of society – those who are poor, disabled, single parents or of a different race – being included.

person cannot use it, the church has not fulfilled its obligations. Similarly, providing an induction loop for hearing aid users is not sufficient if it is not checked regularly and kept in working order. Thirdly, provide training – to leaders, stewards, etc. – which is relevant to the adjustments made to include disabled people. It is important that stewards and welcomers are generally aware of the needs of people with a variety of disabilities and know how to respond to requests for changes and adaptations. Fourthly, ensure that disabled people are aware of any accessibility provisions, for example, on signs at the church entrance, on external notice boards, in publicity materials and advertisements. Make sure that information and signs are clear, using the international pictorial disability symbols. Fifthly, make sure that it is easy for disabled people to ask for help if they need it. Finally, regularly review the effectiveness of your disability provision and make further changes if the review says they are necessary.

It will not be possible to anticipate every barrier which a disabled person may face, but if churches adopt the good practice above, they are likely to have met the legal requirements. Remember that many adjustments are simple and relatively low cost.

Once a church has become aware of the requirements of a particular disabled person who attends or wants to attend, there is then an obligation on the church to make a particular adjustment. If it is difficult to respond positively because the adjustment is unreasonably impractical or expensive, the church may still be complying with the letter of the law. However, this gives a message of rejection to the disabled person and they are unlikely to want to attend.

The biggest hurdle for most people will be the implementation of the final part of the Act on 1 October 2004 which requires buildings to be physically accessible. Where a "physical feature" makes it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people to access a church building you must have taken reasonable steps to either remove the feature; or alter it so that it no longer acts as a barrier to access provide a reasonable means of avoiding the feature; or provide a reasonable alternative method of making the service available to disabled people. "Physical features" include characteristics arising from the design or construction of a building and premises, including the approach, the entrance or way out of the building. They include fixtures, fittings, furniture, equipment or materials on the premises, including temporary structures.

You should always think about incorporating access improvements when you are doing any building or refurbishment work, as it will cost less to make such improvements at that time. When you are making major alterations, make sure they comply with Part M of the Building Regulations and British Standard 8300 (2001). Your architect or local Council Planning department will be able to help you.

THE DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT IS ONLY A SMALL PART OF THE STORY!

It is people's attitudes that make a real difference – if a church genuinely wants to be inclusive of disabled people, it will give thought to finding a way around any practical difficulties. Churches who see disabled people as important and precious to God will want to go further than the DDA requires; they will want disabled people to be fully included in all aspects of church life.

The Churches for All Campaign (which is led by disability ministry Through the Roof) emphasises the vital need to include disabled people. It is supported practically by all UK denominations, Christian disability ministries and by the Evangelical Alliance. It provides objective, measurable access standards and guidelines for good practice so that people with disabilities, elderly people and their families may be fully included in the life of the church.

The campaign comprises three parts:

- Access standards, which provide objective information on the accessibility of churches in four disability areas: mobility impairment, visual impairment, deafness and hearing loss and learning disability.
- The Good Practice Guide that addresses issues of attitude and practice which are not able to be objectively measured. The Guide is a definitive source of reference for churches that want to be inclusive of disabled people.
- A Policy Statement, which all churches are urged to adopt. This sets out the church's commitment to being inclusive, identifies a named individual in the church who can be consulted on accessibility issues and commits the church to keeping accessibility and inclusiveness issues under regular review.

Later this year there will be a series of presentations throughout the UK sponsored by the Evangelical Alliance, local churches and a number of Christian disability organisations. Look out for local advertisements or keep an eye on the Through the Roof website for dates and venues. ■

USEFUL PUBLICATIONS ALL AVAILABLE FROM THROUGH THE ROOF*

Churches for All pack – £25.00 Apply for accreditation under the Churches for All Standards, including a self-assessment questionnaire and Good Practice Guide.
Churches for All Good Practice Guide – £2.00 A definitive source to address issues of attitude and practice for inclusive churches.
Churches for All CD Rom – £19.99 Interactive training resource giving insight into the world of disability, an understanding of the Disability Discrimination Act and the full text of most of Through the Roof's resource publications.
Events for All – £1.00 Make your major conference, church event or Bible week inclusive.
Roofbreaker Guides – £2.00 Simple, practical advice on how to make church activities inclusive (for little or no cost).
On Higher Ground – £2.00 Advice on car parking, ramps, steps and lifts.
Through the Roof Accessible Loo leaflet – £2.00 Providing an accessible toilet in church.
Getting around in your church – £2.00 A guide to clear signage.
Carpenter's Kids – £3.00 Simple, practical advice for churches on supporting families with disabled kids.
Sign me in – £3.00 Making church life inclusive for Deaf Sign Language users.
 *Available post free from the Through the Roof shop www.throughtheroof.org or by post from Through the Roof, PO Box 353, Epsom, KT18 5WS; phone 01372 749955; email: info@throughtheroof.org; Web: www.throughtheroof.org. More information about Churches for All can be found on www.churchesforall.org.